

In fact, Ms. Smith said, in response to my own questions about this, that it is clear that a group of allies will fail to deliver on this pledge by 2024; and, currently, another group are not close to meeting it, although they say they hope to make up the difference.

Here is my point: The security situation has not improved since 2014. It has deteriorated. Russia, as we speak, is still menacing Ukraine. And now China is menacing Taiwan.

The United States is already facing hard choices, and we are going to face harder choices yet about how we allocate our defense resources, which are scarce; how we allocate our force posture, how we structure our force posture in a world that is growing more dangerous. And the China threat, in particular, is one that is going to make us make difficult choices in what we prioritize in the Asia-Pacific versus what we prioritize in Europe.

The bottom line is we need our allies to meet not only their 2-percent commitment, but we need them to do more in Europe for their own defense because we must focus on the deteriorating security situation in the Indo-Pacific and in the Asia-Pacific with regard to China and its imperial ambitions in Taiwan.

I asked Ms. Smith for her commitment that she will press our NATO allies not only to meet their 2-percent commitment, but to revise that commitment so that we can have a truly common defense in this era of multiplying challenges and deteriorating security. She has refused, unfortunately, to give me that commitment.

I can't block her nomination, but I can ask that we take a vote on it. And so for that reason, in a moment here, when Senator MENENDEZ brings her nomination to the floor, I will object and ask for a vote on her, in particular; and I will, as I said, object to others on behalf of my colleagues. With those comments, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

Mr. MENENDEZ. It is disingenuous to suggest that this can all happen by the majority leader and 60 votes. There were no calls when Republicans controlled this Chamber for votes on each and every nominee. On the contrary, as the leader said, large numbers of Trump nominees to the State Department or Ambassadorial or State Department positions were passed on voice. They were passed on voice vote.

I don't know. In the case of NATO, I think the nominee made it very clear before the committee—I know that our colleague is not a member of that particular committee—but she made it very clear before the committee that she was advocating for all of our allies to reach their 2-percent commitment.

And what better way to achieve it than to actually have an Ambassador at NATO to pursue that goal?

But if you don't have anybody there, guess what. You can't pursue that goal. So let me try again.

I want to ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Executive Calendar No. 327, Anne A. Witkowski, of Maryland, to be an Assistant Secretary of State (Conflict and Stabilization Operations).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. So we will continue to have conflict and stabilization without anybody being in charge.

I ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Executive Calendar No. 318, Christopher P. Lu, of Virginia, to be Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations for U.N. Management and Reform, with the rank of Ambassador.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, on behalf of my colleagues, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Here is an example. We hear we want reform at the U.N., but we can't put the person there in charge of helping us reform the U.N.

I ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Executive Calendar No. 462, Julieta Valls Noyes, of Virginia, a Career Member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of Career Minister, to be an Assistant Secretary of State (Population, Refugees, and Migration).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. All right. I heard a lot of my colleagues talk about how we should get more SIV people from Afghanistan. This is the person who could help us do it.

I ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Executive Calendar No. 437, Julianne Smith, of Michigan, to be United States Permanent Representative on the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, with the rank and status of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. I ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Calendar No. 461, Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat, of New Jersey, a Career Member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of the Minister-Counselor, to be Director General of the Foreign Service.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. I can't wait to hear the next objection to someone who would be Ambassador to Israel—to Israel.

I ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Executive Calendar No. 452, Thomas R. Nides, of Minnesota, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the State of Israel.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, on behalf of my colleagues, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. MENENDEZ. So we will have no Ambassador in Israel as we deal with the challenges of Iran and others in the region. It is mind-boggling, all of those who get up here and talk about our ally, the State of Israel, the importance of the State of Israel, but we won't have an Ambassador there to help us meet the challenges that Israel has.

I ask that it be in order to make the same request with respect to Executive Calendar No. 443, Michael Carpenter, of the District of Columbia, to be U.S. Representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, with the rank of Ambassador.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. HAWLEY. Mr. President, on behalf of my colleagues, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MENENDEZ. Well, let's see if we get a lucky one.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of the following nomination: Executive Calendar No. 453, David M. Cohen, of Pennsylvania, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to Canada; that the Senate vote on confirmation of the nomination; that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to the nomination; and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report.

The bill clerk read the nomination of David M. Cohen, of Pennsylvania, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to Canada.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the nomination.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Cohen nomination?

The nomination was confirmed.

Mr. MENENDEZ. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

THE ECONOMY

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, since the Democratic leadership and the Biden administration first proposed the massive tax-and-spend legislation called reconciliation 7 weeks ago, I have come to the floor every week to explain what is in this massive tax-and-spend proposal and why I believe it is wrong for the economy at a time of high inflation, low economic growth, and record levels of debt.

Before I talk about that, though, I think it is important to consider where we have been, how things could be better. Before the pandemic began, back in February of 2020—largely thanks to commonsense, pro-growth tax reform that was passed in 2017 by Republicans here in the Congress and the Trump administration—we had one of the strongest economies we had ever seen. We had 19 straight months, in February of 2020, of wage growth over 3 percent on an annual basis—19 straight months of wage growth, real wage growth, above inflation—by the way, most of it benefiting lower and middle-income Americans.

We had the lowest poverty rate in the history of our country since we started keeping track of it back in the 1950s. Blacks and Hispanics had the lowest unemployment rate ever. Overall, we had the lowest unemployment rate in 50 years. It was an opportunity economy. We need to get back to that.

Then, of course, as everyone remembers, we had to deal with the effects of COVID-19, including shutting down much of the economy. Luckily, we now have vaccines that are making it possible for us to return to a relatively normal lifestyle.

But there is one big problem. While the pandemic is finally starting to fade, the economy is being seriously challenged by extremely high inflation.

Don't take my word for it. Here is what the data says. The latest Consumer Price Index jumped to one of the largest increases in 13 years, to 5.4 percent. That means people are paying more for everything. The latest Producer Price Index went up too. That means the folks who produce the goods are paying more to put them on the shelf.

Real wages are actually down because, adjusted for inflation, wages are down by an average of 1.7 percent during the Biden administration. So people back home tell me: I got a wage gain, Rob, but I am not feeling it because inflation is eating up all the gain I got.

Wage increases may be out there, but they are not above inflation. The response by Washington has been unprecedented, what is called stimulus spending. It is like adding fuel to the fire.

Stimulus spending at a time when demand was already increasing and the economy was already rebounding has been a recipe for inflation, and that is exactly what has happened.

Unfortunately, contrary to what the White House has said—which is that this is going to be transitory, in other words, temporary—it looks like it is here to stay for a while. And middle-class families, of course, are feeling the squeeze.

We are paying 42 percent more at the pump—42 percent higher this year than last year. It now costs almost a hundred bucks to fill up a pickup truck. I know that because I filled up mine in Ohio recently—\$85.

I just can't believe that, here in Congress, we are thinking about passing additional legislation to make inflation even worse. Everything is up. Natural gas is expected to rise in that 40 percent range, just as the winter heating season kicks into high gear. And it is not just fuel costs. It is groceries. It is furniture. It is everything.

Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Here is the report from the New York Times. And I read their lead: "Thanksgiving 2021 could be the most expensive meal in the history of the holiday."

They are saying that because everything has gone up. The cost of turkeys has gone up double digits, the cost of pumpkin pie, the cost of everything that people are having to buy for Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately, the actions of this Democratic Congress are a big part, again, of why this inflation is so high. Back at the beginning of the year, Democrats passed a \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill that mostly did not deal with COVID, but it did provide the most stimulus spending to our economy ever in the history of the Congress. This stimulus spending essentially primed the pump on an economy that was already recovering nicely.

Multiple nonpartisan groups, including the Congressional Budget Office here on Capitol Hill, told us that the economy was improving already. In fact, CBO said that the economy was recovering and it would recover to its prepandemic levels by midyear. That was by June 30 of this year. Many of us tried to warn that if we overheated the economy, spent more money to prime that pump, that it would result in more inflation.

And it wasn't just Republicans. Larry Summers, who served as Treasury Secretary under President Clinton and served as National Economic Adviser for President Obama, basically said that. He warned that injecting so much money into the economy would lead to inflation. And, of course, it is lower income and middle-income Americans who get hurt the worst.

It is basically a hidden tax. As I mentioned earlier, the annual inflation rate last month was 5.4 percent, but everything I am seeing is double-digit inflation this year compared to last year.

But if your wage rate is below that, if your wage increase is below that—maybe you received a 3-percent wage increase—it is actually going to be harder for you to be able to afford what you need for you and your family.

In other words, not too long after we enjoyed a record stretch of wage growth, prepandemic, that primarily benefited lower and middle-income workers, we are now seeing just the opposite: a pay cut for everyday Americans.

What do we need to do to address this? Well, stop the stimulus spending because that is helping to fuel this inflation.

There are two major bills that Congress is considering right now. One would help, and one would make matters worse.

What are they?

Well, the first is the bipartisan infrastructure bill. It passed the Senate in early August with significant bipartisan support. That is unusual around here, particularly for a bill as significant as this, but we worked to ensure that the bill was one that both sides could support.

And it makes too much sense for it not to become law. It will help fix our Nation's crumbling infrastructure. It will fix our roads, our bridges, our rail systems, and our ports, which are particularly important right now given the supply chain issues that our country is experiencing.

It will also help upgrade our digital infrastructure. High-speed internet will now be available to kids so they can learn, so people can get their healthcare online, so people who want to start a business can do so. It will boost our Nation's ability to provide that kind of high-speed broadband, particularly in our rural areas.

Importantly, thoughtful, conservative economists like Michael Strain at the American Enterprise Institute and Douglas Holtz-Eakin at the American Action Forum will tell you that this bipartisan infrastructure bill is counterinflationary; in other words, it will push back against inflation. Why? Because it adds to the supply side of our economy, as they will say. It contributes to our Nation's long-term growth because it makes long-term investment in hard assets. Think of that bridge in your State or your community that needs to be fixed. That spending won't happen in the next year, but it will happen over 5, 10, maybe 15 years, and it will lead to a more efficient and productive economy.

It also will make us more competitive against countries like China, which currently spends more than four times as much as we do on infrastructure as a percent of their GDP. Why? Because they want to get ahead.

The bipartisan infrastructure bill also has no tax increases. Let me repeat that. Unlike the second bill we are going to talk about, the bipartisan infrastructure bill has no tax increases on the economy.